

COLLECTING BALLADS AND FOLK SONGS IN TENNESSEE

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For the sake of clearness, may I state some well known principles about folklore in general and ballads and folk songs in particular. The author or originator of folk material is usually unknown to the public; at least he is one with no pretense at a literary career or reputation. The material must be transmitted for some time orally. Once written or recorded in any way, it ceases to be active or living folklore and becomes a record of folklore as it was; however if the material which a collector takes from an oral source continues to be transmitted orally by the folk, this material continues to live as folklore and must be recorded again and again if the students of folklore are to study intelligently the development and changes which are nearly always present in this material.

Folk ballads are songs which tell a story in an entirely objective manner. The composer or singer shows nothing of his own personality or emotions, but merely acts as an intimate mouth piece through which the narrative is presented. Many of the modern ballads end with a moral, but this characteristic is a comparatively late addition not found in the English and Scottish ballads.

The following ballad, The Soldier's Wedding, will illustrate the statement just made. It was sung to me last September by Mrs. Easter of Walnut Cove, North Carolina, who heard it some years ago but does not know the person or persons from whom she heard it.

I'll tell you of-a soldier that's lately from the war.
He courted a lady for her fortune and great store.
Her fortune was so great it could scarcely be told,
Although she loved the soldier because he was so bold.

O soldier, O soldier, I cannot be your wife;
My father is so cruel I fear he'd take your life.
He drew his sword and pistol and swung them by his side,
And swore he would get married let what might provide.

And on to the priest and returning home again,
They met her old father and seven armed men.
Let's run, says the lady, for fear we shall be slain;
Fear nothing at all, speaks the soldier again.

O daughter, O daughter, how can it be.
It's little did I think you would scandalize me.
It's married you are; you are a soldier's wife,
And down in yonder valley I'll take your life.

Then speaks the soldier, I have no time to tattle,
Although I am poor and ragged and not fit for battle.
He drew his sword and pistol and caused them to rattle.
The lady held the horse while the soldier fought the battle.

The first one he came to, he pierced him through the brain.
 The second one he came to he served him just the same.
 Let's run says the rest for fear we'll all be slain,
 For fighting of a soldier, we find it is in vain.

O hold your hand bold soldier, the old man he cried,
 And you can have my daughter to be your lawful bride.
 And listen while I tell. My gold and silver's not small,
 Hold your hand bold soldier and you shall have it all.

They mounted their horses and home they did ride.
 A nice wedding supper for them they did provide.
 He named him his son and called him his heir.

Come all ye young ladies; there's fortune yet in store,
 And never slight a soldier because he's sometimes poor.
 A soldier is brave; he's a jolly, brish, and free;
 He'll fight for his true love and her liberty.

The folk song shows several differences from the folk ballad. These are primarily the same as those between the literary ballad and the lyric. The folk song, unlike the ballad, is not narrative, and therefore does not tell a story. It is not objective and unemotional but subjective and very definitely shows the emotion of the composer or singer. The following folk song will illustrate my statements. It was sung to me by Walter Williamson, a negro shoe-shine boy in Walnut Cove, North Carolina. When I asked him where he learned it, he said, "I don't know. I just learned it."

Hambone is sweet
 Possum meat is good,
 Bacon meat is very, very fine.
 Oh give, oh give me,
 I really wish you would
 A piece of dat watermelon
 Smilin' on the vine.

You can go down in Birmingham
 Or anywhere you go,
 You get your liquors there every time,
 But this I want to tell you
 There ain't no dish of mine
 Like that juice from that
 Watermelon rind.

You go on down in Georgia
 Or anywhere you go.
 You can get your liquors there every time.
 But this I want to tell you
 There ain't no dish of mine
 Like that juice from that
 Watermelon rind.

The modern folk songs frequently contain a touch of humor, or are based entirely on this characteristic. The following was

collected in the recent TVA survey made by Professor Cole and Mr. Anderson.

I wouldn't marry an old maid,
I'll tell you the reason why,
Her neck's too long and stringy
I'm afraid she'd never die.

I wouldn't marry an old maid,
I'll tell you the reason why,
Hung my foot in the corner of her fence
And tore down all her rye.

Joseph William Neal of Walnut Cove, North Carolina, was able to add three stanzas to this song.

I won't marry a doctor,
I'll tell you the reason why,
He's always a going around
A making sick folks die.

I won't marry a lawyer,
I'll tell you why
He's always a going around
A telling some big lie.

I won't marry a preacher
I'll tell you the reason why;
He's always a standing in the pulpits,
A telling some big lie.

My father, a South Carolina minister, in his less serious moments enjoyed the following.

The first time that I saw her
She was standing in the door,
Her shoes and stockings in her hand
And her feet all over the floor.

The first kiss that she gave me
I never shall forget,
She'd just been eating onions
And I think I smell 'em yet.

The first kiss that she gave me
It hit me right ker-slap.
But the next one that she gave me
It hit another chap.

But let us return to the ballad, which never has a touch of humor, but takes for its unemotional narrative some tragedy common to human nature the world over, or affecting a whole community or group. The following was sung to me by Mrs. Pearl Smith of Danbury,

North Carolina, as we sat last summer in front of her one-room mountain cabin.

The Late Kenney Waggoner

It is out in Mississippi
Not many years ago;
A young man started out in life,
A life of fun and woe.

McKenney Waggoner was his name,
A man was vand and bold.
He shot down Sheriff MacKintosh
And went to Tennessee.

It was there they captured Kenney,
Put him in the jail.
He had no one to help him out,
No one to go his bail.

Kenney broke the jail one night
To make his git away.
He thought that he could go through life
And never have to pay.

It was out in Kennis, Texas,
Where Kenney met his fatal.
A woman sheriff caught (or called) his hand
When he pulled the gun too late.

They carried him back to stand his trial
Right where the deed was done.
The judge he said to Kenney, now
No more you'll pull your gun.

McKenney Waggoner broke the laws
And he threw his life away.
Behind the prison bars he'll live
Until the judgment day.

Young people, oh take a warning
And listen while I tell.
Don't ever break the laws of God
Or you will pay the price.

The next ballad which I shall present further illustrates the tragic subject matter of this type. It is concerned with the terrible railroad wreck which occurred near New Market, Tennessee, Saturday, September 24, 1904. It is interesting not merely because of its closeness to the people of Tennessee--many Knoxvilleians and others can tell first-hand experiences about this wreck--but also because

of the two versions which I have found. One version appears in a religious song book, The Harmonic Praises, published by the Harmonic Publishing Company, Morristown, Tennessee, 1915. The words and music are by R. H. Brooks, who, I am told, was once a teacher at Rutledge, Tennessee, a town near the scene of the wreck. The other version is a clipping from some newspaper, pasted in a scrapbook by Mrs. Newman of Knoxville. Although each version has some stanzas that the other does not have, one is obviously taken from the other; and I believe that the Brooks version is the original. The first stanza of each will illustrate. The Brooks version reads:

The Southern Railway had a wreck
At ten o'clock one morn;
Near Hodges and New Market grounds,
The place and date adorn.
The twenty fourth of September,
The year Nineteen and Four;
Was when an awful wreck occurred
Of both the rich and poor.

The Newman version reads:

One autumn morning in Tennessee
An awful wreck was heard;
East of Knoxville and New Market
Was where the crash occurred.

Other stanzas show the same similarity of details. I have been told that this ballad is still being sung. Although I have as yet found no one who sings it from memory and although I have found only two versions, I am hoping to find the song still living among the folk. Miss Genevive Anderson of Maryville in her excellent work in the ballad has still another version. Since the Newman version contains more details and in my opinion is the better, I shall read that one.

One autumn morning in Tennessee
An awful wreck was heard;
East of Knoxville and New Market
Was where the crash occurred.

Chorus:

The people were excited;
they wept aloud and said,
My God! there's a wreck on that railroad
And many we fear are dead.
Oh, how much of sadness; Oh how many pains;
Many sad hearts are aching
For friends on the ill-fated trains.

The east and west-bound passenger trains
Were running at highest speed;
They struck each other in the curve;
'Twas a horrible sight indeed.

The engine crew on the west bound train
Their orders had misread;
About one hundred and fifty were hurt,
And nearly seventy were dead.

The passengers were riding along
And chatting the time away;
Reading, smoking, laughing, talking,
And all seemed bright and gay.

But in a moment the scene was changed
To one of sad despair;
For shrieks of dying men and women,
And children filled the air.

The track was strewn with dead and dying
'Twas an awful sight that day;
The engine crews were buried alive,
Without even time to pray.

A little girl with her head mashed
Called mama each dying breath;
Her parents lay not far away,
But they were still in death.

One dying woman prayed to live
Just for her children dear;
A headless woman's body lay there,
Her head lying near.

Nurses and doctors soon arrived
From Knoxville on a train;
They labored very hard,
To save life and ease pain.

People in Knoxville rushed to the depot
More news to ascertain;
For many had relatives and friends,
Aboard each fatal train.

Little could they learn till four o'clock
A train pulled in that day;
With seventy who were badly hurt,
Six dying on the way.

Excitement was not over then
For people were filled with dread;
'Till eight o'clock a train pulled in,
Carrying barely two of dead.

Many who kissed friends farewell
Before they went away;
Soon were brought back to them in death,
With lips as cold as clay.

The next day was the Sabbath day
 And many were laid to rest;
 We trust that they were on the Lord's side,
 And now are with the blest.

And when we board a railroad train
 It's little do we know
 That we may meet the same sad fate
 And into eternity go.

The song which is closest to the people of Tennessee in point of time and present interest is the Song of Cove Creek Dam. This song, which I shall call a folk song, although its qualifications, as you shall see, are doubtful, was composed and given to the public last summer. The author of the words is Cleatus Burnett of Sharps Chapel, Tennessee, who fitted words to the tune of Red River Valley. He had his offering printed on a single sheet and sold it last summer on the streets of Knoxville for fifteen cents. These details, of course, remind one of the English broadside ballads of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were presented to the public then in much the same way. The Song of Cove Creek Dam deals with the tragedy which befell the community being flooded with Norris Lake. I call this a folk song even though we know the author; at least it has the possibilities of becoming what I should call a folk song. He is speaking for the folk of his community; yet he is sadly lacking in metrical skill, good taste, and other qualities which are necessary for a first-rate folk song. This song fascinates me because if it is taken up and transmitted by the folk of Tennessee we shall see what students of ballads and folk songs have long wanted--the original version. If we are able to find, some time in the future, various versions of this song and also a new song of the New Market Wreck, we shall have the material for an interesting study on the oral transmission of ballads and folk songs.

I said that The Song of Cove Creek Dam was doubtfully labeled a folk song. Certainly those who hold that the composer of a folk song is never known and those who hold the communal theory of origin would refuse to admit this song into the folk class. However, if we are able to collect in the future various versions of this song, we shall at least have some valuable information on the folk transmission of popular songs. Here is The Song of Cove Creek Dam.

When the old Cove Creek Dam
 First was started, most everyone
 Said it would be so grand,
 For they did not realize of the
 Water that was going to cover this land.

Many a time that old bill
 Went through Congress,
 To the Senate it would go,
 Even if it was passed through the
 Senate, it would only meet a President's veto.

But when Roosevelt got elected
 He came to Muscle Shoals.
 We will build a power plant,
 Here and at Cove Creek, a flood control.

So good-bye to old Union County,
 It's the dear sweet home of my birth
 There's no other place I'll put before her,
 She's the sweetest place on earth.

Here we have our trials and troubles
 But to each other, we are kind and true,
 Will we find in some other country,
 Will the people be like me and you?

They say that this is just a project,
 It's the best the south has ever owned
 If its going to bring in so much money,
 Why can't they pay us more for our homes?

There are people who have no land to sell,
 And have nothing to fear or dread
 But it will touch the hearts of ten thousand,
 When they come to remove the dead.

For we all have folks that are buried
 It will bring remembrance back to our mind,
 But we don't want to leave them a sleeping,
 In this flooded water behind.

Of course it is bringing in some money,
 For there are people are working night and day,
 But just think of the fond hearts,
 It's breaking for the ones that's old and gray.

The sad hour is yet to come
 When we leave our dear friends and our homes,
 For they say that the water will
 Cover the dear place where we all love to roam.

The best land we have will be flooded in Union County, Tennessee,
 But they say they will reforest
 All the waste land by setting
 Out black locust trees.

When this dam is fully completed,
 And the wild beast takes our place,
 I wish Old Senator Norris had to come
 Here and live by the sweet of his face.

Is there no such thing as a river
 Up there at Senator Noriss' home
 If there is, o why couldn't he,
 Have built him a dam of his own?

It won' be long 'till we are scattered
We'll drifting in every way,
But if we will live true to Jesus
He will gather us together some day.

As you go across old Clinch River,
You may look at the mountains and hills,
But the next time you see that old river,
She may be all eddy and still.

From these examples, we may conclude that there is a living folklore in Tennessee; and therefore, there is the opportunity, and need, for collecting this material, for as long as there is a living folklore, there will be developments and changes. In order to study these changes, we must have from time to time as many recordings as possible. In addition, we may note that it will be particularly valuable to collect versions of The New Market Wreck and The Song of Cove Creek Dam. Furthermore, we must remember that music is a vital part of ballads and songs, and should be recorded with the words. The only accurate means of recording a ballad or folk song is on a phonograph. When we have discovered those ballads worthy of accurate recording, we should secure a recording machine. Thus we may see that the ballads and folk song of Tennessee present a wide open field for all those interested in such a study.